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ABSTRACT

The Institute for Education and Social Policy assessed the relationship between standards-based reform and the charter school movement in four states: Texas, Massachusetts, California, and Louisiana. These states were selected because they are the focus of other projects sponsored by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and because, as a group, they offer interesting variations in the status of standards-based reform. Site visits were made to nine schools, two in three states, and three in California. Researchers held interviews with 13 administrators, 24 teachers, and many students, and conducted 14 teacher and parent focus groups. Sites visits were supplemented by document collection and telephone interviews with state education officials and interviews with state charter resource staff. The charters of schools in this sample were at times superseded by state or district decisions that reshaped aspects of the charter school, eroding its accountability. Five of the nine schools served local students as well as choice students. Charter schools also experienced state and district standards through the interaction of specific teachers, specific students, and curriculum over the school year. Charter schools in this sample appeared to receive relatively little professional development for standards-based reform, but they generally were not out of the loop when it came to receiving state and district mandates. Experience with these schools suggests that charter school funding may be reproducing the resource disparities that exist in traditional public schools. (Contains 17 references.) (SLD)

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Final Report to the

Edna McConnell Clark Foundation

August 1999

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Standards-Based Reform and the Charter School Movement in 1998-99: An Analysis of Four States

Carol Ascher, Robin Jacobowitz, and Yolanda McBride

BACKGROUND

Two recent movements, standards-based reform and the development of charter schools, reflect public recognition that student achievement must be improved and that educational accountability should focus on student performance. However, while the standards movement attempts to raise achievement through formally articulated state (and sometimes district) standards for students' academic learning at different grade levels, charter schools operate from the belief that deregulation, accompanied by performance-based accountability, will improve schooling and increase student achievement.

Since charter school reform and state standards share an emphasis on performance-based accountability, educators have generally assumed that the two movements will complement and strengthen one another. As the Education Commission of the States argued in *Designing and Implementing Standards-Based Accountability Systems*,

> "When well-designed accountability systems are coupled with other policy changes, such as standards-based reform, site-based management and

budgeting, public school choice, charter schools, and reform networks, schools are given more authority to produce results, yet are held accountable by parents and community members" (ECS, 1998, pp. 8-9).

In actuality, the relationship between charter schools and state standards has been more complicated. First, state-level policy-makers have had difficulty implementing the performance-based accountability systems critical to both movements. Hassel (1999) reports that, in the four states he analyzed, the granting of charters was never challenged on academic grounds; instead, fiscal problems – lack of money on the part of the state or district, or schools with too high proposed costs—were the only reasons chartering agencies gave for refusing to grant charters. Hassel views this as beneficial, since he believes that chartering agencies, if they did intervene in academic issues, would only act as conservative influences. Nevertheless, a school's capacity for producing learning has not been of initial concern to chartering agencies. More important, several studies indicate that charter schools are not always held to the performance standards they set for themselves, in part because states and districts are unsure of how to hold schools accountable, and in part because the standards promulgated in the schools' original charters are ambiguous and not easily measured (Corwin, 1996; Schwartz, 1997). According to *The State of Charter Schools*, the US Department of Education's most recent national study, nine out of ten charters report receiving fiscal auditing, but only seven out of ten report being monitored for accountability in achievement and attendance (RPP International, 1999).

By 1998-1999, only 34 charter schools (out of 1207), or less than 3 percent, had been either voluntarily closed or had their charters revoked. Though reasons for revocation included

financial and management problems, parent and community dissatisfaction, inadequate enrollment, and disorganized academic offerings, none had been closed for failure to meet their achievement outcome promises. (DeShryver, 1999). In addition, Wells (1998) reports that, in California, where charter schools are hailed as the reform of choice among the business community, school districts may fear the political and financial consequences of closing schools, even when those schools have not met their promised performance objectives.

Second, while some standards advocates believe that standards are critical to the performance-based accountability demanded of charter schools, some charter advocates see standards—particularly those that mandate teacher qualifications and curriculum design—as representing the very regulatory intrusion from which they have sought relief through charters. As an observer of the charter movement recently noted on the charter school listserv, charter schools are supposed to "have the autonomy to meet the newly mandated standards and the accompanying tests in their own particular fashion." But when autonomy is limited to such relatively superficial aspects of schooling as discipline codes, test preparation, school uniforms, and the purchase of educational materials, "the core of education – curriculum, testing and teaching methodologies…is left in the hands of the external federal, state, and local school authorities" (Margaret Tannenbaum, charter school listserv, 12/16/98).

METHODOLOGY

The Institute for Education and Social Policy (IESP) assessed the relationship between standards-based reform and the charter school movement in four states: Texas,

Massachusetts, California, and Louisiana. These states were selected because they are the focus of other Edna McConnell Clark Foundation projects; all have viable charter school movements; and as a group, the four states offer interesting variations in the status of standards-based reform.

Our research was devoted to answering six questions:

1) How do state assessments affect charter school accountability?

2) How do charter school staff view the effects of the standards movement on charter school autonomy?

3) How do charter school staff view the effects of state standards and curriculum frameworks on charter school curriculum and instruction?

4) What professional development about standards do states offer charter school staff?

5) What information about standards do states disseminate to charter schools?

6) What information about standards do charter schools disseminate to charter school parents?

To explore these questions, we visited nine charter schools; two in each state (our California sample included three site visits). While in the charter schools, we interviewed a total of thirteen administrators, 24 teachers and innumerable students. We also conducted fourteen teacher and parent focus groups. In addition, we collected all available documentation concerning the schools and their relationships to the state—as well as the district, if the district was the chartering agency or had created district-wide standards. Our site visits were supplemented by nine telephone interviews with state education officials and four interviews with state charter resource staff. Finally, detailed information on charter school demography, available through the !ESP's charter school demographic database project, was

used to support our analysis of the relationship between student populations and charter school resources.

Our nine visits yielded information on a wide range of instruction and classroom management practices. For example, some teachers had full command of their classes, and students were working alone on assignments, listening attentively to the teacher's lecture, or working productively together. But in other classrooms, instructional materials were limited (in one school there were literally no books, and students were sent to the front office at the beginning of each class to make xeroxes); lessons were unplanned and haphazard; classrooms were noisy and chaotic or, even if relatively quiet, students were often disengaged. We also saw similar curriculum – Core Knowledge, for instance — being delivered quite differently in different schools: in one school it meant "chalk and talk" with students sitting in their seats taking notes; but in another Core Knowledge School, children worked in informal groups or lay reading on the carpet. Most important for our current research, though it was easy to assess the quality of teaching and learning in a classroom, it was impossible to judge whether the state standards were being systematically met, or even whether the state's curriculum frameworks were meaningfully embedded in the lessons the students would be receiving over the course of the year. Thus, the findings presented below rely only minimally on observations and are drawn largely from interviews.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Site visits to the charter schools, and conversations with the staff of state departments of education and charter school resource centers, surfaced both complimentarity and tension in

the relationship between the charter school and standards movements. Below we summarize our findings, according to our six research questions.

1) How do state assessments affect charter school accountability?

Although the state standards movement, and particularly state assessments, can help to clarify charter school accountability, our experience confirms the complications of implementing performance-based accountability for chartering agencies as well as charter schools.

Throughout the four states, the standards movement has reinforced the emphasis on achievement outcomes as measured by standardized tests for all public schools, not just charter schools. As a state official put it, "In God we trust. All others better bring data." Yet the provision of school performance data has not always yielded clarity about how to treat either low-performing public schools or charter schools that do not meet their promised objectives. Although the charter school accountability/autonomy exchange should result in unequivocal decisions about the renewal or denial of existing charters, the political reality of these decisions is much more nuanced. A state official described the renewal of a charter school that had not met its accountability goals, "Even if a school doesn't meet its outcome promises, if it makes a good case in its renewal and if it's clear that it's a good school, it will be renewed."

Of the nine schools we visited, three had gone through the renewal process and had all been renewed, though none had met their promised outcome objectives on the states standardized tests. An elementary school with an experimental curriculum had proposed multiple

outcome measures, which, despite approval by the district at the time of chartering, were found "vague and unmeasurable" during the renewal process. Moreover, the school had not done well on the state's standardized achievement tests. Nevertheless, the chartering agency had decided to give the school a second chance and renewed its charter. At a middle school whose district charter was renewed despite the school falling short of its achievement goals, the principal noted, "We're the reform of choice of the business community. The district would be very reluctant to close us down." Finally, the state charter of a back-to-basics school was renewed, as the state official noted, because the school could show that its students had made some progress, even though they did not reach the standardized test outcomes the school had promised.

Although six of our site visits were to schools whose accountability reviews were still two to four years away, these schools were already thinking ahead and most had an idea of how well their students would do. Asked about meeting their promised achievement outcomes, a staff member in a school serving predominantly Hispanic students said, "It won't be easy, but we will do it. We could do better if we shaped our student body, but we didn't. The kid's skills weren't as high as we hoped coming in."[1] A middle school with two more years before its charter would be up for renewal served troubled students at least two years behind grade level. Although the principal was skeptical about her students meeting the school's promised achievement outcomes, she believed that the district was unlikely to hold the

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[1] The school had actually developed a curious method of determining its student body. Forbidden to exercise selection, the school established an "air of selectivity" by including as a prerequisite for entry an interview, an entrance test, and a home visit. Although test results were not used to reject students, the simple requirement of taking a test represented an admissions barrier for some students.

school to its accountability promises, since closing the charter school would mean releasing the troubled and failing students back into the district's schools. "They don't want our kids back in the local schools!" the principal remarked. Though all the schools took their promised performance objectives seriously, not one of the six schools believed that they would be shut down for failure to meet those objectives when their charters come up for renewal.

Nevertheless, several administrators and teachers argued that the legislative provisions giving priority to at-risk students create a burden for charter schools, and potentially contradict the notion that charter schools can become national examples of high student achievement. In one state, a newspaper which had simply ranked all schools by test score outcomes had recently headlined its conclusion, "Charter schools at the bottom …." Some charter school staff noted that the accountability measures appropriate for at-risk student populations are different from those in other schools. Others argued that there was a contradiction between asking schools to provide instruction with only 90 percent of the fiscal resources that other public schools receive and then asking them to serve at-risk students who need extra support. Still other staff members expressed surprise that their students were so academically behind, and longed for the chance either to control their student selection processes or to rework their promised outcome objectives. In a middle school serving at-risk adolescents, the charter administrator was petitioning the state to allow the school to pre-test students at the grade level corresponding to their academic ability, rather than their age, and then measure students' progress by gain scores, rather than reporting only a raw test score result.

In several schools, including one with middle-income students, performance-based accountability created a heavy emphasis on testing and the institution of practice tests. Several schools also had after-school or Saturday hours dedicated to teaching test-taking skills. Interestingly, this emphasis elicited mixed reactions. Some charter school administrators regretted it — particularly those who saw their innovative curriculum or instructional methods increasingly constrained. A charter administrator complained, "We are tested out! There is pressure not only to cover the content of all these tests, but also to cover test-taking skills." In other schools, the emphasis on testing was applauded because it prepared students for "the real world" and sharpened accountability. In one school, teachers were awarded bonuses of $10 for each student who met or exceeded the state standard on the state assessment. A teacher supported the program saying, "the greater good is represented in a good test score. We all do practice tests."

Although the charter schools we visited had uniformly agreed to being measured at least in part by standardized test scores, several were working to create alternative ways of assessing their students' progress. Moreover, the larger policy debates about the role of standardized assessment were very much a part of the charter school discussions we witnessed. Charter staff often expressed resentment that their performance on standardized assessments remains the primary measure of achievement – for their sponsoring agency as well as the public. A principal said, "If part of our program is gardening, music, modeling, painting, its not enough to say it does a lot for self-esteem. It doesn't test. There are no scores for it. We face the incredible task of trying to make all those things around arts measurable."

2) How do charter school staff view the effects of the standards movement on charter school autonomy?

Four factors influenced the way charter school teachers and administrators perceived the effect of state standards on the autonomy of their charter school: 1) their level of experience; 2) whether their previous educational experience was in public or private schools; 3) the school's program or curriculum focus; and 4) the composition of the student body served by the charter school.

Charter school administrators generally supported state standards, arguing that the autonomy of their charter school and the standards movement complemented one another. They generally believed that standards in their states emphasized core curricular subjects, just as their schools did. Sometimes they noted that, since the standards focused on "skills," they were still free to fill in the content. A common sentiment among charter administrators and staff was that their schools' curricula easily surpassed state standards. A charter administrator who also taught one class said, "I don't even think about state standards,when I do my lessons. If I am doing my job, then I am reaching them without even trying."

However, seasoned charter school administrators and teachers were more likely to acknowledge a tension between the autonomy they were promised and their obligations to administer the state's assessments and pay attention to the state's standards. An administrator who had spent several decades in both public and private schools complained that the state's standards "exhibited disrespect for the work of the charter school founders to create the kind of school they wanted." Another, speaking about the effects of standards in

her school, said, "I definitely have a greater appreciation of why public schools are so rigid."

By contrast, young teachers and administrators, new to schooling, often believed that charter schools and state standards were complementary reforms. Confronted with so many new tasks, these teachers generally were generally grateful for the standards. For young staff, even the alignment of curriculum with standards represented a reassuring, if arduous, task. "The standards are perfectly functional. We would need something." Even a teacher who complained of the difficulty of integrating the standards – "It was horrid! It's still hard!" – blamed the problem on not having been trained in curriculum development, rather than on the standards that had necessitated the exercise.

Whether the interviewees' previous experience was in private or public schools also influenced their perspectives on standards. Staff coming from traditional public schools appreciated the freedoms they were gaining in charter schools—although some also noted that the accountability for autonomy exchange looked better in theory than in practice. An administrator whose previous job had been in a public school argued, "we get a state directive: you have to do it this way. Then we remind them that we're a charter school. But the state still says, you have to do it this way." More important, staff with significant experience in traditional public schools felt confident about their ability to distinguish between regulations that needed to be followed and areas where they could simply ignore the directive and go about their business, or even fight the directive. By contrast, staff whose previous experience had been in private schools was sometimes intimidated by the regulations involved in the public sector. A charter administrator, who had spent most of his

long educational career in independent private schools, began the interview by saying that he had to check his e-mail "to see what I've done wrong now." He also begrudgingly spoke of the compromises that were making his school more conventional. "If we want to survive, we have to accept their golden handcuffs."

Only one school in our sample, opened with a Waldorf program, was attempting an alternative pedagogy whose philosophy and curriculum was in clear conflict with the standards. In this school, the staff was more likely to feel their autonomy restricted by the standards — and, in fact, the school had been forced to change its curriculum sufficiently that it was no longer using the Waldorf name. Most obvious was the Waldorf philosophy of allowing children begin reading as late as the third grade could not be maintained when students were responsible for taking state and district standardized tests. Although some teachers in this school still maintained that they were "grateful" for the state standards, which "sharpened teaching," others spoke of not having the time or training to integrate the standards, or of the problems of standards "diluting" the philosophy. Both the administrator in this school and a number of teachers had come from private schools, where they had learned the Waldorf method; thus their reactions to the standards were influenced by both their newness to the world of public schooling and the school's attempt at creating an alternative program.

Finally, charter schools serving at-risk student populations were particularly concerned about state standards, fearing that their students were at a disadvantage whenever they were required to move through a specific set of skills or take the same assessments as more

advantaged students. Administrators in these schools confided that, if they had understood the severity of the academic problems of their student body, they would never have committed to high accountability outcomes. One staff member in a school serving extremely troubled teenagers suggested that a school's accountability objectives should be rewritten once the school knew more about its student population.

3) How do charter school staff view the effects of state standards on charter school curriculum and instruction?

As with their views of the effects of standards on charter school autonomy, the opinions of charter school staff towards state standards and curriculum frameworks were very much shaped by the teachers' and administrators' levels of experience, whether this experience had been in a public school or a private school, the school's philosophy and focus, and the student body served by the charter school.

Charter schools demand high-energy staffs and a willingness to work well beyond traditional hours. Moreover, because the per-pupil funding that charter schools receive often must be spent on non-instructional expenses, salaries for teachers tend to be at the low end of the public school salary scale. Thus, young and inexperienced teachers tend to predominate in charter schools across the country (Lewis, 1998). While charter school administrators in the schools we visited came from a variety of backgrounds, the overwhelming majority of teachers were in their first three years of teaching. The predominance of inexperienced teachers in charter schools was critical to the way in which state standards and curriculum frameworks were viewed. Teachers in our site visit schools generally saw the standards and curriculum frameworks in their state as helpful, and, when

pressed further, described them as reasonable and age-appropriate for their students. They seemed unaware of the criticism one commonly reads in education journals: that many college graduates would be unable to meet current standards, or that it would require more than twelve years of public schooling to cover all of the standards in some states. For those schools engaged in creating their own curriculum, the state standards provided benchmarks, and when curriculum frameworks existed, they were heavily relied upon.

By contrast, experienced administrators, and the rare experienced teachers, viewed the need to align curriculum and school mission with the state standards less enthusiastically. In a child-centered charter school serving predominantly middle-class students, an administrator complained, "They don't get the picture that we are here for the kids." In an Edison school, several teachers and the administrator were resentful about having to work with Edison to fill in the gaps between the Edison curriculum and the state's standards. (In another Edison school, the administrator told us that the company was taking care of the alignment process independent of the school, and she had been assured that Edison's curriculum would more than meet state standards.)

The reactions of charter school administrators and other staff to state standards and curriculum frameworks were also influenced by whether their previous backgrounds had been in public or private schools. However, those with private school backgrounds at times appeared to take the standards and curriculum frameworks *more* seriously – as if they were not as inured to government mandates as those who had spent their careers in public schools. Ironically, because staff with private school experience tended to predominate in schools

with experimental and nontraditional curriculum, it was this group that seemed to be working hardest (and with great anxiety) to reshape instruction to state standards and curriculum frameworks.

Several of the charter schools we visited were Core Knowledge schools that prided themselves on their 'back-to-basics' curriculum, focusing on mathematics, science, reading, and writing. For staff in these schools, state standards and curriculum frameworks appeared very harmonious with and supportive of their curriculum. Nevertheless, one school that saw its curriculum as "back-to-basics" found that it had to recraft its skills-based science curriculum to match the state's content-based science assessment. But the realignment of curriculum to match state standards and curriculum frameworks was problematic for schools with alternative instructional programs. In addition to the Waldorf School, which was being renamed because its curriculum had been severely altered by the state's standards and assessments, a middle school that had been a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools was moving toward more traditional student groupings aligned with the state's grade-based standards. Once proud of its ungraded, heterogeneously-grouped classrooms and inclusion of special education students in regular classrooms, the school had started to sort grades into homogeneous groups of students, so that the teachers could focus on moving the entire classroom up a few points on the standardized assessments.

In schools with at-risk students, the attempt to reshape instruction to meet the state standards appeared to be more a matter of formality than a genuine engagement with the state's guides for appropriate learning standards. A dramatic example of such formal compliance comes

from a school with no classroom books and no library. In response to the state mandate that students know how to conduct research by the time they entered the tenth grade, a ninth-grade teacher had brought in a number of his personal coffee table books for his lesson on doing research. These books were passed out to a class with minimal reading skills. Though the "research" lesson consisted of asking the students to paraphrase any paragraph in their book, only one student even attempted the exercise. Schools like this one, where lack of resources compounded the difficulties of teaching low-performing students, teachers did what they could to comply with state mandates, hoping that their schools would not be closed because of poor test scores. But even in schools that were not as resource-starved, teachers complained that state standards influenced how and what they could teach in negative ways. A middle-school teacher explained, "the state test influences my teaching in that it forces me to spend time on test-taking skills – and this takes considerable time." Another teacher in a state whose standards and curriculum frameworks were supposedly "skills-based" lamented that he was unable to do "discovery learning – learning through hands-on experience, project-based learning, etc. – because I have to cram so much information into my students heads."

Performance-based accountability also appeared to influence which students teachers focused on. Most teachers agreed that their energies were primarily aimed at students who performed at the middle to upper levels. "One tenet of our school is that hard work beats brains, so the focus is often on the average kid." Since teachers felt they had to bring at least some students to the promised benchmarks, this focus on the middle and higher performing students occurred even in schools serving students who had experienced considerable

academic failure. "The pressure to teach all the material means that these [lower-performing] students sometimes get written off," said a teacher in a charter school for students who had experienced two or more retentions.

4) What professional development about standards do states offer charter school staff?

Two recent studies suggest that charter schools receive little professional development or similar support from district and states, and most charter schools rely on internally-created professional development (Horn and Miron, 1999; CAREI, 1998). The state education departments in the four states in our sample were not always proactive about insuring that charters were aware of, much less receiving, state professional development services. Only one of the states we studied had sponsored a summer institute on standards for teachers. In all four of our study states, there was also at least one charter school resource center, which used a mix of private and public funds to provide some support to charter schools. However, the support these centers offered ranged widely, from full professional development programs to simply answering specific questions about aspects of legislation from individual charter school staffs.

In only one district in our study was there an active attempt to involve charter schools in the same professional development on standards and other topics being provided to public schools. This was a district that had actively created a set of standards separate from those of the state. Ironically, charter school administrators tended to view this district as heavy-handed and intrusive, and one charter school was resisting participation.

Whether or not charter school teachers received professional development training in standards also depended on the principal's relationship with the providers. For example, the headmaster in one charter school expressed contempt for the professional development opportunities offered by the state, the district, the charter school resource center and the local university. If teachers there wanted professional development outside of what the headmaster and his assistant headmaster provided, they had to take the initiative to discover what might be offered by the district or the state. By contrast, in a Core Knowledge charter school, the director herself had worked as a professional developer for a state regional center, and so embraced the opportunities offered by the agency and encouraged staff involvement. Nevertheless, even in this school, the teachers in the focus group (all but one quite young) reported feeling isolated and needing more training, both in Core Knowledge and in the state's standards.

Charter schools were often models of informal collegiality. Yet there was generally little time in the school day for staff meetings, mentoring, or other professional development. In several focus groups, teachers said that their meeting with us was the first time they had gotten together to talk in many months. One of the few senior teachers, a woman who had previously taught eighth grade social studies to gifted and talented students, was now working in an at-risk school. She felt that she had not been properly trained to teach her students, whose reading levels were significantly below their grade. Although helping to create a curriculum for their classrooms allowed these teachers a level of thoughtful training and experience generally unavailable in a traditional public school, we found little evidence of the support necessary to make this a more structured experience. Instead, in addition to

developing their own curriculum, teachers were often asked to work under little or no supervision with ungraded and heterogeneous student groupings that often included students with severe academic and emotional problems.

One of the more interesting side-effects of the charter school movement appears to be the development of a range of nonprofit and for-profit professional development venues serving charter schools. In one state, charter schools were receiving notices of professional development assistance from a number of private services that ran parallel to the offerings of the state and local authorities, and that served to distance the charter schools from the networks used by other public schools.

Despite this apparent growth of a new professional development network directed to charter schools, one of the attractions of for-profit companies like the Edison Project may be the professional development it offers teachers, schools, and districts. Edison advertises the provision of professional development to all its participating charters (Rhim, 1998). Although some new staff members in Edison schools complained that they had not received the professional development the company promised, they also viewed the professional development programs offered by their state or district as having little to do with their school.

5) What information do states disseminate about standards to charter schools?

Although we did not compare the level of knowledge of state standards in charter schools to the level of awareness in other public schools, charter school administrators seemed generally well acquainted with their states' standards, and even better informed about the

benchmarks they were expected to meet on their states' standardized assessments. Only one charter school, containing a GED program and a special eighth grade for students with two or more retentions, viewed their state's standards as somewhat peripheral. In the other eight schools, the staff was generally well acquainted with their state's (and district's) standards, and many teachers had the curriculum frameworks among the few books kept on or near their desks.

Nevertheless, dissemination of state information on standards to charter schools varied, both in the specific dissemination formats and in the amount of information received by the charter schools. Some charters received information about state regulations, including standards, through regular mailings, e-mail notifications, or even professional development seminars provided directly by their state offices. In some states, regional centers or districts were active intermediaries in conveying information from the state. Where charter schools were defined as LEAs, they received information that districts would normally winnow for their schools. Some charter schools deliberately sought the designation of LEA to receive all possible state information. Finally, where districts were the chartering agencies, and had developed their own standards, the charter school was more concerned with the district standards then with the state standards.

A common complaint among charter school administrators was receiving too much, contradictory, or irrelevant information about state and district regulations and policies. Several mentioned a steady stream of state mandates, which they had to decide were, or were not, applicable to charter schools—a job demanding significant administrative

experience and sophistication. In one case, a director had argued that as a charter, her school had no reason to institute site-based management, a requirement for all public schools in the state. In another, the principal described his district's performance targets for the next two years. "On one level, you could argue that the district could be taken to court because they can't require that. But, in real politics it makes no sense, and serves no public purpose for charters to complain about accountability." In two schools that were chartered by their districts, the schools had developed such confrontational relationships, and the political dynamics were so disruptive, that the districts withheld vital information, including details about state workshops on standards. In one of these charter schools, the principal believed that, if the founder had not gone to a job in the district office, the school would not have received announcements of state professional development programs or even of potential funding allocations.

Administrators' experience with public school systems, and their ability to navigate regulations – including state and district standards—was key here, as elsewhere. A principal with many years of public school experience described his attitude toward district mandates: "Thanks, it's interesting. But we'll do it our own way." By contrast, a school whose director came from a private school may have been responding to more regulations than necessary and was bogged down by paperwork and requirements. Although the school was involved in a network with other charter schools, the director felt isolated and afraid, and was struggling to incorporate the state standards, although he believed the standards were detrimental to the school's educational program.

6) What information on standards do charter schools disseminate to charter school parents?

Since state and district standards are a key force influencing charter schools, charter school parents ideally need to understand these standards and the curriculum frameworks and assessments they may impose on all schools, including charters. Because our site visit time was limited, focus groups with parents were arranged in advance by charter school staff. Thus our focus groups were often composed largely of parents who were volunteers or had jobs in the school, and were presumably among the better informed of charter school parents.

Nevertheless, even these charter school parents knew little about state or district standards. Those few parents who did seem fairly well informed reported having read about standards in their local newspaper. Only one parent in all of our focus groups said she had learned about the standards in a parent-teacher conference, where her child's teacher had explained, "This is what is going to happen." In several focus groups, the level of parent knowledge about state standards, curriculum frameworks, and assessments was so minimal that our entire protocol had to be abandoned.

More surprising, parents only rarely could describe what made their school a charter school. Among the differences parents articulated between a charter school and a regular school were: "A charter school gives you more free time to put your mind together." "A charter school is a school that has higher expectations for kids and pays attention to children's needs." "The school is not as focused on tests as in the regular school." Some parents believed that charter schools paid more attention to parents' suggestions than regular public

schools. Other parents believed charter schools were for children who previously had trouble with schooling. "I thought charter schools were for low-performing kids, and now I know that they work to meet the needs of all their students," said a mother. A tiny minority of parents understood that a charter school was supposed to be closed if it did not bring its students' achievement to a certain promised level, but they didn't necessarily think this was a good idea. One mother, who understood charter school performance accountability, nevertheless told us that she didn't believe in standardized testing and had asked that her child be exempted.

This relatively low level of parental knowledge can be partly explained by the fact that several charter schools in our study were not schools of choice for their students. In one case, the district had offered the charter school a free building if it accepted the neighboring school's overflow students. In another case, students with two grade retentions in their previous school were referred to the charter school; for these students the school was their *only* "choice" short of dropping out. In a third case, the charter school administration had actively decided to change the school from a selective school to a non-selective neighborhood school. As the principal put it, "I don't want anyone to choose this school. I have more than enough kids from the community."

Despite their low level of knowledge, the parents in our focus groups were unconditional in their support for their charter schools. When asked to describe an ideal school (which we had hoped would elicit areas of concern about the charter school their children were attending), parents invariably replied "This school" and "A school just like this!" Some were

content that the school offered a safe and warm atmosphere. A common assumption seemed to be that, because their children were happy, they were learning. Even those parents who reported having been active in and critical of previous public schools appeared to trust their charter school. One parent, who had a range of angry stories about her child's previous school, had not yet visited her child's charter school classroom.

While a number of charter schools had instituted parent contracts making parent involvement a condition for student admission, information provided by charters to parents about standards-based reform appeared to be minimal, at best. One charter school had received a grant to inform its parents about standards, but the programming made possible by the grant had not yet begun. In another, the principal had held a forum for parents about the state's frameworks and assessment program; however, he said, no parents showed up. In another school, the goals of the school and information about state standards were written up in the school newsletter. In yet another school, the state's standards were kept in the office along with the school's own curriculum guidelines. According to the administrator, parents are "free to come into the school and look at the binders."

Conclusion

Charter schools are an experiment in freeing schools from public school regulation and encouraging greater accountability for student achievement. In theory, state standards should contribute to charter school accountability by providing clear benchmarks and standardized assessments against which charter schools can measure themselves (and can be compared to other public schools).

However, charter schools do not operate in a regulatory-free environment. State charter legislation includes civil rights, health and safety, and, specific state-based equity provisions. In many states, charter regulations also dictate teacher certification and demand that these schools hire union teachers. Standardized tests demanded by states (and sometimes districts), and state (and district) standards and curriculum frameworks are all part of a developing regulatory framework shaping charter schools.

Charter schools begin by following the educational programs they lay out in their charters, and charter school staff take seriously their achievement outcome objectives. Yet the charters of the schools in our sample were at times superceded by state and/or district decisions that reshaped student composition, teacher selection, and curriculum and instruction, thereby eroding charter school accountability. Although charter schools promise student and parental choice, five of the nine schools we visited were either neighborhood schools serving a combination of choice students and neighborhood and overflow students, or schools in which at-risk students were asked to choose the charter as the only public school available to them if they did not want to drop out.

Finally, charter schools experience state and district standards through the interaction of specific teachers, specific students, and curriculum over the course of the school year. We began this study with the anticipation that charter school staff might be resentful or frustrated because of the infringement of state standards on their promised autonomy. But the charter school administrators and teachers we interviewed were generally appreciative of

their state's standards, including the related assessments and curriculum frameworks, for providing clarity and guidance for their charters' educational programs.

David Cohen has argued that, "Teachers' varying experience, knowledge, and sense of efficacy influence what they notice about policy, how they interpret it, and what they do" (1996, p. 116). Our own experience suggests that, within their general appreciative response, the ways charter school staff viewed various aspects of implementing state standards in their schools was influenced by four factors: First, administrators (who tended to be more experienced), as well as more senior teachers, were more critical of state standards, the assessments tied to them, and the state's curriculum frameworks, than were new and inexperienced teachers.

Second, charter school staff whose previous educational experience was in a public school tended to see the standards and their accompanying assessments and frameworks as less intrusive than did staff whose previous experience had been in private schools. On the other hand, staff with public school experience were also more confident about working creatively with those aspects of the standards which they found cumbersome. Although state and district standards were most problematic for schools with an experimental curriculum, our only experience of such a school—a Waldorf school—was one in which many staff members had private school backgrounds, and so their perceptions of standards were determined by this additional factor.

Third, to the extent that the school's educational philosophy and program focus were

harmonious with state standards, school staff was likely to find them more useful and less intrusive than when the school's educational philosophy and program focus was experimental and did not dovetail with the standards.

Fourth, the student body served by the charter school heavily influenced perceptions of state standards among charter school staff. Staff serving middle-class students tended to view the state's standards as easily met and the curriculum frameworks as matching what they were already doing. But staff in charter schools serving at-risk students—schools that were generally also less well-resourced—tended to view the assessments as a difficult stretch, and they often hung only the thinnest lesson plans on the curriculum frameworks. Cohen's observation that, "Educators in the disadvantaged schools see state systemic reforms as another complicating element in their struggles with the problems of an extraordinarily diverse and needy student body, while educators in more privileged schools see the same state policies as a minor element in their efforts to keep up with parents' elevated expectations" (1996, p. 115) is confirmed by our research.

With the exception of a district engaged in an active professional development campaign with all its public schools, including its charter schools, the charter schools in our sample appeared to receive relatively little professional development for standards-based reform. However, the availability of such professional development was in part dependent on the charter school administrator. While some administrators were well-connected to district, regional and state professional development offerings, others were isolated from these providers, and one administrator took a hostile attitude toward all professional development

offered outside his school.

One of the more interesting results of the charter school movement has been the development of a range of nonprofit and for-profit professional development forums competing with those offered by the traditional state and local authorities. Whether these new providers are helping to prepare charter schools to effectively implement state standards was unfortunately outside the scope of this research.

Although there were clear differences among charter schools in how much their staff knew about state standards, charter schools do not seem out of the loop when it comes to receiving state and district mandates as opposed to professional development attempts. Charter school administrators were generally well aware of their state's standards, including the standardized assessments for which they needed to prepare their students, and charter school teachers were often working actively to integrate curriculum frameworks into their instructional plans. In several cases, charter schools had both district and state standards with which to contend.

By contrast, charter school parents were strikingly uninformed about state standards. While parents were aware of the state assessments—some of them had children in the school's Saturday classes or other practice sessions—they generally perceived charter schools as less involved in testing, and so better for their children, than traditional public schools. This tendency among parents to take a dim view of testing went along with their view of charter schools as warm and caring schools. Nevertheless, it is striking that the parents in our focus

groups did not play the vigilant well-informed parental role posited by charter school theory. Despite parent contracts mandating parent involvement in several schools in our study, parents in the schools we visited exercised little voice in charter school offerings.

Charter Schools, Standards-Based Reform, and Educational Equity.

Our site visits and interviews in four states have raised the additional problem of how charter schools and standards-based reform are affecting the inequities that have traditionally plagued public education in this country. The charter schools we visited were in urban and suburban neighborhoods and districts, and served quite varied student bodies. The one charter school which served a generally upper-middle-class student body was the only school to have raised large sums of private money, built its own facilities, and incorporated state standards into a curriculum that offered a rigorous "basic" curriculum and was student-centered. While all nine schools had fiscal problems, charter schools in low-tax districts serving low-income students were especially strapped. These schools tended to have poor educational resources, including few books, supplies, and well-trained teachers, and their attempts to incorporate state standards were the most superficial.

Although charter schools have promised to improve their students' achievement, even while spending fewer public dollars than neighboring public schools, our experience suggests that charter school funding may be reproducing the resource disparities that exist in traditional public schools. As in public schools, these disparities are invariably linked to the socioeconomic backgrounds of their students.

Standards advocates have argued that, by ensuring that *all* students reach high achievement,

state standards can be a route to educational equity. But our visits to charter schools suggest that the ways in which standards are being implemented correspond very closely to both the resources available in the schools and the student body being served. In charter schools with middle-class students and adequate resources, the staff viewed their state's standards as reasonable, and felt confident that their students would do well on the assessments; they also took the time to integrate the curriculum frameworks into their own instructional focus. By contrast, in charter schools serving low-income and at-risk students with inadequate resources, the staff saw their state's standards as yet another pressure they were unlikely to meet, and their attempts at developing standards-based lessons for their students were often superficial and last-minute. At the same time, because the staff in these schools knew that their students were not wanted in the district's regular public schools, they did not believe that they would be closed down for failure to meet the state standards.

In a review of the standards movement, Wheelock (1999) has asked, "Will educators use standards to tackle…knowledge, lockstep curriculum, teacher assignments tied to standardized testing and impersonal instruction? Or will standards-based 'reforms' simply reinforce the status quo?" Our visits to charter schools suggest that, without the educational resources, including professional development, necessary to make high standards a reality, standards will become merely another reform that lessens charter school autonomy without impacting a deeply inequitable educational system.

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